

Sheikh Hasina's carte blanche

The common people expect a cabinet that will comprise people with a clean image and good track record. However, if control is exercised in good faith, there will always remain room for rectification.

KAZI S.M. KHASRUL ALAM QUDDUSI

EVEN some staunch supporters of Bangladesh Awami League (AL) were pensive instead of being over the moon following the landslide victory of the AL-led grand alliance. Yes, there was a kind of apprehension as to whether the AL leadership would be able to keep the promises and live up to the trust reposed in them by the people who have given Sheikh Hasina free rein to move ahead through a silent vote revolution.

Some have warned of recurrence of history in the context of South Asian politics, where there was either a debacle or army takeover after such victories. I, however, feel positive because I sense confidence in the complete freedom provided to Sheikh Hasina by the people. I thank the judicious electorate of the country for strengthening the hands of

Sheikh Hasina for executing her charter of change.

Yes, the equation is quite simple. She has such a large majority that no vested quarter in her party will be able to stand in the way if she wants to fulfill the promises she made to the nation. She has been given the liberty to impose strict rules so that no one from her party can torment anybody in her name.

The common people expect a cabinet that will comprise people with a clean image and good track record. However, if control is exercised in good faith, there will always remain room for rectification. She can give marching orders if any of her cabinet ministers is found wanting. She does not have to worry about genuine information. She can easily draw on the reports of the objective media for this purpose.

If she cannot manage time to glance over the newspapers, she can employ some dedicated people to do that for her and update her from time to time. Based

on media information and followed by thorough yet quick validation, she will be able to ditch any minister without a second thought about possible repercussions. As long as the interests of the people as well as the country are upheld, the people will not mind despotism against the corrupt and the criminals.

I believe Sheikh Hasina has now become a true statesman. Years of vicissitudes and a wealth of experience of politics and governance are behind her. In addition, the presence of enlightened and competent people around her assures one even more. Absolute caution, however, should be taken so that the so-called well-wishers in the garb of close relatives and party stalwarts cannot divert her concentration and devotion even for a while.

It is now common knowledge that the role of close relatives had tarnished the image of political leaderships in the past - Khleda Zia being the most recent victim. One feels particularly happy that no one will be able to single out his or her contribution for this resounding victory of the AL-led alliance. Yes, no leader -- senior or junior -- was exceptionally influential in this victory. It is only the masses who were instrumental in this

massive victory.

With a new government starting its journey, there will be many new appointments in many posts. One, however, expects that the new government will not try to tinker with the constitutional bodies constituted or reconstituted by the caretaker government. Admittedly, one of the caretaker government's achievements was that it staffed almost all crucial bodies with competent and efficient people. Thus, merely strengthening them will serve the honest purpose of the new AL-led government.

However, in terms of new appointments in posts other than constitutional ones, competence and commitment rather than rewarding party lackeys should be the criteria. Only fools will forget the outcome of manning important bodies with incompetent people in the recent past. How can one say that people like Mr. Aziz or Tahmida Begum were not less responsible for BNP-led coalition's humiliating defeat?

To many, this landslide victory is a big challenge for AL. Thus, there are more warning bells than applause, and rightly so. To my mind, however, it is more of an opportunity than a challenge. There is reason to be confident that the new gov-



How will she use her power?

ernment, led by the daughter of the father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Sheikh Hasina, will be wise enough to make the most of this grand opportunity. Millions, thus, join me in the prayers so that Sheikh Hasina's government

can thwart a tragic repetition of history and succeed in rewriting the same.

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Tyranny of irrelevance

These parties are a burden on the political system of the country. They wander meaninglessly in the political field with no contribution in any direction. They are products of personality clashes, and are headed by persons who were denied a desired position in the main party.

SAADAT HUSAIN

AS many as 38 political parties contested in the national election 2008. Only eight parties, including those in the alliances, have at least one of their members elected to the parliament. To be specific, except Awami League, BNP and Jatiya Party, no other party has got more than three seats in the parliament.

But for the rules regarding registration, many more parties would have joined the fray simply to register their presence in the political arena of the country. The situation was not much different in other national elections also. Very few parties had representation in earlier parliaments.

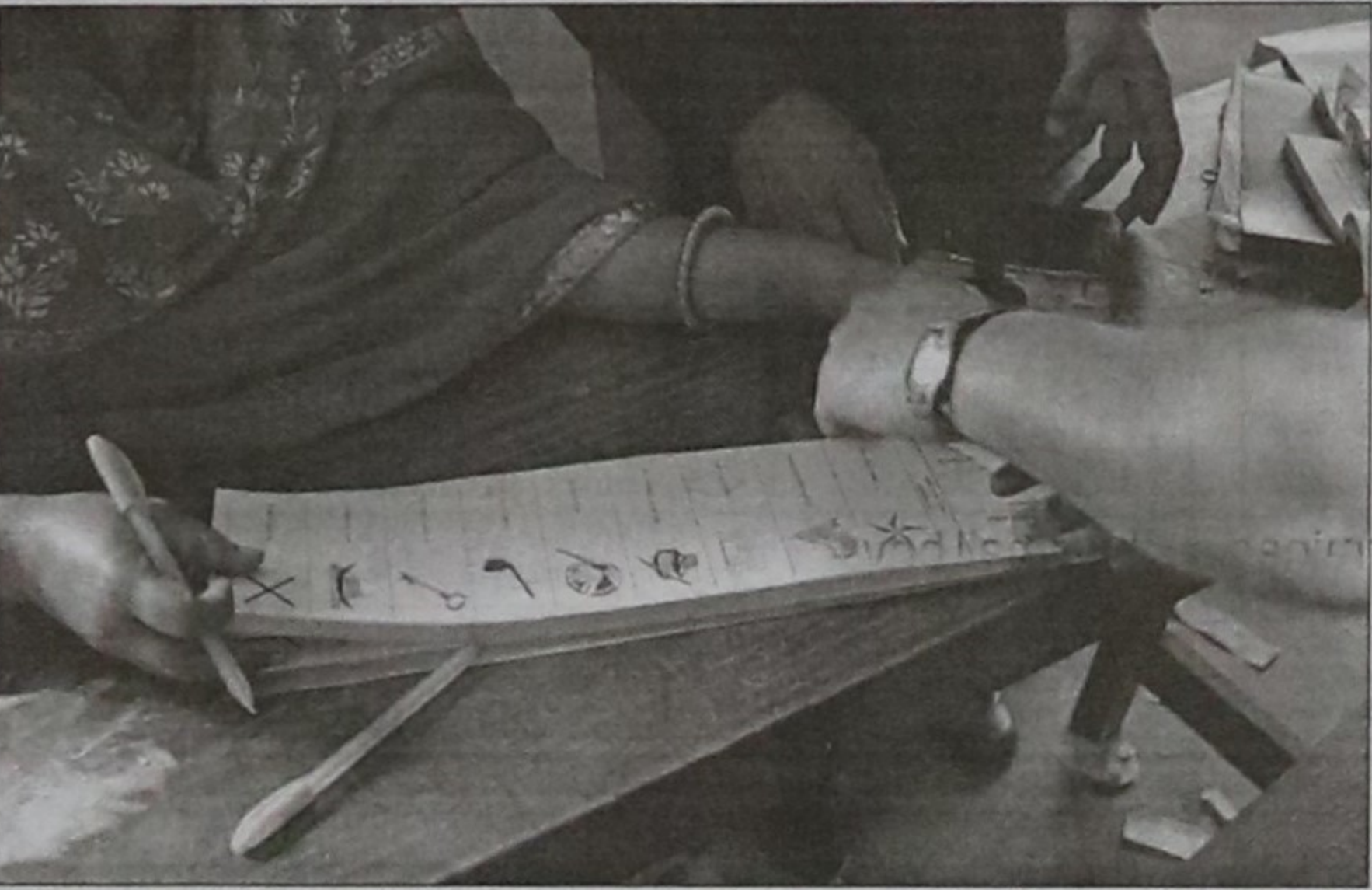
While four major parties have accounted for about 95% of the votes cast, 34 small parties taken together have

pulled only 2% of the votes. Hundreds of candidates from these parties forfeited their security money. Many of them, having filed their nomination papers and received the election symbol, did not make any effort to make their presence felt in the constituencies. They sat idle throughout the elections, as if they were dummy candidates. Maybe some of them were. Some of them might have sold their candidature and got a good return in the bargain.

It does not make any sense for minuscule parties with such an abysmally low supporters' base to contest in the national elections. In fact, their existence cannot be justified with such a microscopic size of supporters. But exist they do. It may be interesting to ferret out the factors for their coming into being, and their intriguingly continued presence on

the stage.

Political parties with distinct ideological moorings have the rationale for staying in the field because they are struggling for a cause and hope to wrest power once their ideology catches the imagination or preference of the people. They do not rule out extra-electoral means, like people's upsurge, for getting to power. The number of such parties is very small.



Reduce the number of symbols.

All other parties are ardent believers in liberal democracy; for them election is the only route to state power. They have to fare well in the elections to fulfill their avowed objectives. They might have something up their sleeves. In the Bangladesh situation, such plans are not likely to materialise. They have reduced themselves to irrelevance in the process.

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political system of the country. They wander meaninglessly in the political field with no contribution in any direction. They are products of personality clashes, and are headed by persons who were denied a desired position in the main party.

In order to satisfy their egos they floated these "letter head" parties and were content to introduce themselves as the heads of these parties. Some of these parties could not form a full-fledged executive committees or working committees because there were not enough members to man these positions.

Yet, the heads of these parties are invited to state functions and talk shows in the TV channels, and are sometimes allowed to address the nation over radio and television before the national elections. They visit different ministries and directorates, reportedly for lobbying purposes.

Their positions as the heads of parties give them a niche, a visiting card and valuable access to men who matter. They give press release and sometimes get good coverage in the national dailies. They are invited to seminars and workshops, and have a chance to speak their minds before distinguished audiences. In

short, they squeeze a lot of benefits by posing as heads of not too unimportant political organisations.

In reality, there is hardly any difference between these parties and NGOs or CBOs (Community based organisation). Many of these parties would fit in much better as NGOs because they can never get near to state power through the political process. NGO personalities have sometimes been made ministers or advisors. The heads of the nondescript political parties may sell themselves better as NGO personalities without appropriating the political entitlements.

They may explore another avenue. These days mergers are very common in the corporate world; the minuscule political parties may carry out a merger exercise in order to produce viable organizations, which may look forward to sharing state power as junior partners of some alliance. Crafting an effective strategy will be an important criterion for warding off the inevitability of being reduced to irrelevance. For accomplishing this task, the chiefs of these small parties have to bury their egos under ground reality.

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Israel, opium of the people

The technique legitimised and blessed by clerics throughout the Arab world as a weapon against Israel had gone haywire and was used against Arabs protesting Israel's bombardment of Gaza. That twisted and morbid full circle completed on the streets of Mosul can be captured only by paraphrasing Karl Marx -- Israel is the opium of the people.

MONA ELTAHAWY

"Why aren't you as an Arab lady writing about Gaza?"
"Where are your columns about Gaza?"
"Say the Israelis are wrong!"

THE messages started to arrive soon after Israel's bombardment of Gaza killed close to 300 Palestinians. Implicit was the pressure to toe the party line, Hamas is good, Israel is bad. Say it, say it! Or else you're not Arab enough, you're not Muslim enough, you're not enough.

But what to say about a conflict that for more than 60 years now has fed Arab and Israeli senses of victimhood and their respective demands to stop everything else we're doing and pay attention to their fights because what's the slaughter of anyone else -- be they in Darfur, Congo or anywhere else -- compared to their often avoidable bloodletting?

Hasn't it all been said before? Has

nothing been learned?

And then the suicide cyclist in Iraq made me snap and I had to write, not to take sides but to lament the moral bankruptcy that is born from the amnesia rife in the Middle East.

On Sunday, a man on a bicycle blew himself up in the middle of an anti-Israel demonstration in the Iraqi city of Mosul. The technique legitimised and blessed by clerics throughout the Arab world as a weapon against Israel had gone haywire and was used against Arabs protesting Israel's bombardment of Gaza.

That twisted and morbid full circle completed on the streets of Mosul can be captured only by paraphrasing Karl Marx -- Israel is the opium of the people.

What else explains the collective amnesia on display this weekend in the Middle East?

Has Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni forgotten already that just last year she was close to ousting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert for his handling of Israel's 2006 war

on Lebanon launched under very similar circumstances to those that preceded the bombardment of Gaza? And yet there she was making the rounds of US Sunday news shows to explain why Israel had to act against the Muslim militant Hamas movement in power in Gaza.

Does Israel want to make heroes of Hamas in the way it did Hizbollah? What has been achieved from the blockade of Gaza except for suffering of civilians whose leaders care for them as little as Israel does?

Talking about Hizbollah and unwise leaders, has Hassan Nasrallah forgotten that while he rails against Egypt for aiding the blockade of Gaza that he lives in a country, Lebanon, that keeps generations of Palestinian refugees in camps that serve as virtual jails?

And the demonstrators in Jordan and Lebanon? Who reminds them that in 1970, Jordan killed tens of thousands as it tried to control Palestinian groups based there, forcing the Palestine Liberation Army into Lebanon where in 1982, the Phalangists, Christian Lebanese militiamen, slaughtered 3,000 Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Shatila camps?

Not a single Phalangist has been held accountable for that massacre. An Israeli state inquiry in 1983 found Ariel Sharon, then defense minister, indirectly responsible for the killings at the refugee camps during Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. But don't hold your breath for an Arab inquiry. It is Israel that gives sense to our

victimhood. The horrors we visit upon each other are irrelevant.

It is difficult to criticise Palestinians when so many have died this weekend, but the Hamas rulers of Gaza are just the latest of their leaders to fail them. For those of us who long to separate religion from politics, Hamas has given the truth to the fear that Islamists care more about facing down Israel than taking care of their people. The Palestinians of Gaza are victims equally of Hamas and Israel.

Where was the anger when two Palestinian schoolgirls were killed in Gaza when Hamas rockets meant for Israel misfired, just a day before Israel's bombardment?

As for my country of birth, Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak, in power for more than 27 years, has presided over a disastrous policy that on the one hand maintains a 1979 peace treaty his predecessor Anwar Sadat signed with Israel and on the other unleashes state-owned media fury at Israel that has fanned a near-hysterical hatred for the country among ordinary Egyptians.

Yes, Israel's occupation of Arab land angers Egyptians but there is absolutely no space in Egyptian media, culture or intellectual circles for discussing Israel as anything but an enemy. And neither is there an attempt to forget it.

And now Mubarak, old, tired and out of new ideas, is reaping a policy that plays all sides against each other in an attempt to

make his regime indispensable.

But my question to Egyptians and others across the region incensed at Israel is where is their anger at the human rights violations, torture, and oppression in their respective countries? If such large crowds turned out onto Arab capitals every week, they could've toppled their dictators years ago!

It is the ultimate dishonour to the memory of Palestinians killed this weekend to call for more violence. It has failed to deliver for 60 years.

We would honour the dead by smashing through the region's amnesia until we break through to the taboos and continue

to smash. Talking to Hamas? Israel should do it if it will end the violence. Focusing on internal issues in each Arab country and ignoring the opium that is Israel? Egyptians, Jordanians, Lebanese, Syrians et al should do it before their respective states fail for the sake of Palestine.

Palestinians still have no state. What a shame it would be for one Arab state after the other to fail in the name of Palestine.

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Hypnotising the Arabs?

Reasons to be cheerful

NURY VITTAHI

OKAY, so you've lost your job, you're about to lose your home, your investments have vanished, your partner has left you, and the debt collectors have given you a week to live. Now, come on, gang, be honest: are these really reasons to be miserable?

We've all got problems. Look on the bright side. First, you have your health (for a week at least). Second, you have, um, ah, well, you have your health.

Personally, I am fed up of all the gloom in the opinion pages of the news-

papers. There are actually a great many causes for celebration. So here they are.

Reasons to be cheerful:

1. Okay, so the war on terror hasn't been won, but the war against the environment is going extremely well, you gotta admit that.

2. According to yin-yang theory, if you get far enough behind, you end up in first place. Therefore we are all thriving or about to thrive.

3. Most people cannot afford heating any more, so all this global warming stuff we were panicking about like crazy last year now looks like a bless-

ing in disguise.

4. Now the world has descended into a state of misery, poverty and deep, trigger-happy mistrust, George W. Bush's work is done and he can leave the world stage.

5. Karaoke has almost entirely died out, and if anyone tries to revive the karaoke bar near my house, I will personally stamp it out forever, ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?

6. OJ Simpson is in jail. Unfortunately the lawyers who helped him get away with murder are still on the loose, but unlicensed vigilantes will

get them with a bit of luck.

7. Time Inc sacked more than 600 journalists in 2008, but still managed to find US\$15 million to pay for exclusive pictures of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt's babies, so at least we know the media has its priorities right.

8. The melting of the north and south poles indicates that people in rundown, inner-city districts will soon have waterfront housing. How cool is that?

9. Despite what the papers say, I know several people who say their businesses are booming. Mind you, they're all insolvency accountants.

10. A guy with dark skin has taken over the most powerful, most globally influential platform in the world. But that's enough about me.

11. A machine called the large hadron collider was switched on and the world did not end. (Actually, I'm not sure if this is good news or bad.)

12. A large number of world records were broken at the Beijing Olympics, including Youngest Lip-Synching Fraudster.

13. But of course, there seems to be general agreement on what was the biggest story of the past 12 months.

Yes, an astonishing election win shook the world and made people realise that true democracy means anyone, of any race, colour, creed or level of animation can stand up and lead their community.

I am talking of course about the Voters in Romania who re-elected a dead man as Mayor. Neculai Ivascu died of liver disease, but the electorate didn't seem to mind. "I know he died, but I don't want change," a voter said.

There's hope for all of us.

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